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MERLIN AND ARTHUR.

Scott Frederick Surtees

THE FOLLOWING

ESSAY

IS PRINTED FOR THE USE OF THE

EARLY ENGLISH TEXT SOCIETY,

WHOSE VALUABLE AND INTERESTING PUBLICATIONS WERE THE MEANS OF TURNING THE AUTHOR'S ATTENTION TO THE

HISTORIES OF MERLIN AND ARTHUR.

Printed for Private Circulation.

1871.

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WITH THE AUTHOR'S COMPLIMENTS.

MERLIN AND ARTHUR.

The sagas of Norse story tell us of the Berserker's rage, when the warrior, flinging aside all prudence, and forgetful of all odds against him, striking right and left, rushes into the thick of the enemy's ranks.

There are some points of history which, shaping themselves in dream-land, have taken hold of my waking fancies, and now lead me, regardless of consequences and adverse criticism, to lay them before the public.

It is well known how our zealous archæologist in the North, Mr. Greenwell, has, in order to increase our knowledge of tribes and races of past ages, been upturning the grave-yards alike of Briton and Roman, Saxon and Dane; and how, through these researches, he has been enabled to parcel out to each tumulus its proper skull-name, overthrowing in many instances the traditions of the neighbourhood as to its pet Howe or Barrow; so also I have reason to believe that, in connexion with this North-Humberland of ours, there are other tumuli which have passed for what they are not, and other characters which, on examination, turn out not to have been properly classified and sorted. There are some mounds in history, as in grave-diggings, which, towering above the rest, arrest our attention, and which we long to delve in, assured that there is some mystery, some clue to generations past, if you could only but unravel it.

These historic mounds of other days, which stand out clear against the sky-line, are connected for the most part with either priest or warrior.

Now, although I disbelieve in history as it is written by moderns, I do not disbelieve in history as it was written by ancients. I believe that in all these great names and events which captivate and interest us, there is some groundwork of truth and fact. There is one era which has enthralled the attention and enlisted the researches of the clever and the learned of many generations, of which poets ever sing, and historians ever write, and yet out of the dim obscurity of the past no light seems to come to us. In similar cases, when this is so, my plan is to ask myself, is the received version a correct one? can I not reconstruct instead of helping to demolish? Are we not all inclined to be influenced by first impressions, to take up the tale as it has been told us, without searching for ourselves whether it has been told us aright or no? Are there any two characters, in the history of our land, of clerk and hero, more deeply interesting to us than those of Arthur and Merlin? That Early English Text Society, which has done so much good with such small amount of means, has lately thrown much light upon the subject.

I shall have, as I go on, to make free with the characters of some who are saints in story, but I fear are not above the passions of humanity, and to show how the monkish chroniclers of the past, in vaunting of their miracles, have unwittingly admitted of their frailty.

I am about to assert that Germanus and Merlin were identical; that Blase and Lupus were two names of the same person. I shall bring before you many points where the stories told of the one name are the same as those which are attributed to the other; that they refer to persons connected with the history of the same era; that there are incidental tales which bear upon their

private life, which, if true, will account for much that has been puzzling in that tangled web of the page of history. We must first understand the state of religion and government of the countries at the time of which we are about to treat. No words can bring it more vividly before you than those of Kingsley's "The Roman and the Teuton: The Dying Empire" (p. 33). Salvian, a Christian gentleman, born near Treves, married a Pagan lady, and wrote his book, "De Gubernatione Dei," 450 or 455 A.D., a great authority of the state of Gaul when conquered by the Franks and Goths and Vandals. "In the years in which he lived, 416 A.D. perhaps to 490 A.D., all things were going to wrack, the country overrun by foreign invaders; bankruptcy, devastation, massacre, and captivity, were, for perhaps 100 years, the normal state of Gaul, and most other countries besides. . . . No wonder, if Salvian's accounts of Gaulish profligacy be true, that Gaulish recklessness reached at last a pitch all but incredible. He says (p. 43) he himself saw, both at Treves and another city, old men of rank, decrepit Christians, slaves to gluttony and lust, rabid with clamour, furious with Bacchanalian orgies. . . . In contrast with all these abominations, Salvian sets forth boldly and honestly the superior morality of the barbarians (p. 46). 'We, professing orthodoxy, are profligate hypocrites! They, half heathen, half Arians, are honester men, purer than we!'"

In language still stronger Gildas speaks of the vices of those who bear rule in Britain. He recapitulates their kings by name, and tells horrible tales of their adulteries and vices, of the shamelessness of their daughters, of the drunkenness and immorality of the whole race. He expressly states, that not only are the laity given up to such evil practices, but that priest and people are alike. "O ye enemies of God, not priests! O ye traders in wickedness, and not bishops!" (sec. 108). "Wallowing after the fashion of swine, in their old and unhappy puddle of intolerable wickedness,

after they have attained unto the seat of the priesthood or episcopal dignity" (sec. 67).

Gildas also speaks of these bishops "as crossing the seas," and then, "with magnificent ostentation, returning to their own native soil," and "intruding themselves into their own country again as creatures of a new mould, or rather as instruments of the Devil" (sec. 68).

Having thus far cleared the ground to enable me to gain a fair hearing, I proceed further to affirm that there is an *à priori* presumption in my favour, if I state that a bishop of Gaul or Britain of that age is of blameful life, and that it is no way improbable that a king's daughter might be classed amongst dishonourable women. Gildas clearly had some reason for sneering at over-sea bishops. A bishop to have a character as a respectable and moral man must evidently rise above the level of his day. If, then, we find that there is a something in his election and consecration abhorrent to our feelings, and if in the after-conduct of the man there is a manifest want of straightforwardness in the events of his life, after "crossing the seas," we may safely and not uncharitably set him down as one of those who were present to the mind's eye of Salvian and Gildas, when they wrote the account of their contemporaries.

Germanus was given to hunting, and used to hang up his trophies on a sacred tree. He was in office at Auxerre, under the Roman Emperor; he was of noble parents. St. Amator cuts down his pet tree, and Germanus vows revenge. "St. Amator forestalls him, and, obtaining leave from the Prefect of Gaul, causes his ecclesiastics to lay hold of Germanus, and obliged him to quit his secular habit and to receive the clerical tonsure, assuring him that such was the will of God; to which Germanus, struck with astonishment, durst not make any opposition" (Brit. Sancta, part ii. p. 49). He was pitched upon by the Gallican synod (so we are told), with

Lupus, to go into Britain to oppose the Pelagian heresy. The evil spirits had announced to the Britons his coming, and they were there to meet him. He has a public disputation, and beats his opponents by a miracle. They are too honest to pretend to cure the blind; Germanus has no such scruples, and restores the girl to her sight. The devil lays a snare for him, and catches him by the foot. We cannot but think that before a man takes part in the play, or getting up of a sham miracle, he must either have lost or else never possessed any reverence for the great God of heaven and earth. The Saxons and Picts come to attack them; Germanus puts himself at their head; their enemies are worsted, and the bishops, having delivered them "from their visible and invisible enemies," return home. Germanus returns a second time, gets his opponents all banished. . . . Goes to Ravenna to intercede for the Armoricans with the Emperor Valentinian. Bede mentions his name in the chapter next after the account of Ambrosius Aurelius. He adds that Germanus said "he would be their leader," that he "picked out the most active, viewed the country round about, and fixed upon a valley encompassed with hills where to make his stand," and then gives an account of the battle won by the Hallelujah Chorus! (Bede, i. 20). Geoffrey of Monmouth (b. vi. c. 13) places their arrival in the time of Vortigern and Vortimer. Nennius (History of the Britons, p. 32) fixes the adventures of Germanus during the reign of Vortigern, and the time of the coming of the Saxons; gives us an extraordinary account of Vortigern's daughter, an "immodest woman," declaring publicly that Germanus was father of her child; Germanus by a "*tu quoque*" turns the tables upon Vortigern, "who, without deigning a reply, arose and left the synod in great anger." Germanus, with remarkable kindness of disposition, says, "I will be a father to you, my son" (sec. 39), and brings him up as his own son! Vortigern flees, but Germanus follows him, and upon a rock prays for him forty days and forty

nights. Then "the blessed man is chosen commander against the Saxons" (sec. 47). Again, Vortigern flees from St. Germanus to the kingdom of the Dimetæ, and built a castle there; "the saint, as usual, followed him," and prayed to the Lord three days and three nights, and Vortigern and Hengist's daughter, his other wives, and all the inhabitants, both men and women, miserably perished. "St. Germanus after his death returned into his own country" (sec. 50). Now it is singular that Bede and Nennius, in their accounts of the history of these wars, make no mention of the *name of Merlin*, yet in other authors he fills such a distinguished place. The chroniclers who speak most of Germanus speak little or nothing of Merlin; whilst, on the other hand, they who have much to tell of Merlin make short mention or none of Germanus. In Geoffrey, for instance, the allusion (b. vi. c. 13) seems more as if it was dragged in or interpolated out of place by an after-editor, who thought it would never do to have his author write a history of those times without mention of Germanus and Lupus. The chapter appears more naturally to begin at "The king being now," etc., etc., taking the story up from the end of the twelfth chapter.

In Layamon, Vortimer's counsellor is not Germanus, but Merlin. Merlin, like Germanus, is clerk and warrior. In all these transactions he is mixed up with Vortigern and Aurelius and Uther. Merlin had knowledge of and friends in Armorica (Lay. ii. 249, 291). When Uther was made king, "Merlin went away, and the people knew not whither he went" (311). In "Merlin" (E. E. Text Soc., p. 43), they ask Merlin "to abide with them, and govern them." There is great joy amongst the people, who recognize Merlin, "the wisest man in all the worlde. . . . He will teach you how to get the castell." Merlin says "he must leave for a long time" (p. 57). "Guynebaude opposed hym of dyuerse thynges, for he was a profounde clerke. Merlyn hym ansuerde to alle the questiouns. Merlin seide he neuer founde no clerke that euer hadde spoke to

hym of so high clergie ne not Blase, that was so holy a man" (p. 139).

Geoffrey of Monmouth, I noticed above, whilst he treats of these same times, says little of Germanus and Lupus, and much of Merlin (book vi. c. 13). Just mentions their arrival, "the preaching of these holy men, and the many miracles they wrought." It is Merlin, and not Germanus, who is near at hand when Vortigern is burnt in his castle. It is Merlin who, in like manner with Germanus, goes out to war (book viii. 15), and "attended this expedition to give his advice in the management of the war."

Now I come to the critical point of my story, where it requires great care and close attention to unravel the twisted skein.

In these narratives there is mention made of a king's daughter, who is with child when she has no husband, and which said child, for some reason or other, is commonly mixed up in some extraordinary way with Germanus. Merlin also we find in suspicious circumstances, and in league with Blase at one time, and Ulf or Ulfin at another, to procure a certain secresy for the birth of a particular child of royal stock, and to have it carried away, christened and brought up. Let us compare the different accounts. It is evident that at a synod, or husting or Thing, as they would have been after called, there took place much the same as we find in the Norse Sagas, when Christianity and Paganism came in contact. It was a struggle for pre-eminence. It is clear (Nennius, 39, 40) that the Christian party were the stronger; the Pagan, with Vortigern, the weaker. It is clear the king's daughter had a child by some one, and that she said it was by Germanus (Nennius, 39). The Christian party, however, get the victory, and the child is left in the custody of Germanus. The mother, the daughter of the King of the Dimetians, is styled "an immodest woman," and we also find at that era a daughter of a king of Dimetia called a "shameless daughter" (Gildas, sec. 31). If we put together Gildas's account

of his own time, from which it appears that morals and society were worse, if possible, in Britain than elsewhere, as well as the accounts which Gildas gives of these over-sea bishops, and Salvian of Gaul, we shall not be very uncharitable if we come to the conclusion that Germanus was probably, as stated, the father of the child. In Nennius (sec. 40) the Pagan party, *i.e.* the Druids, plot a plan to make away with this child. In sec. 42 he is said to be the son of a Roman consul. Germanus was appointed to high office by the Roman Emperor Honorius, was a personal friend of Valentinian, and married a noble lady at Rome. Is it not most probable that he was sent over by Honorius from Gaul, where he had high military renown, when, in answer to the embassy from Britain, he sent them "a legion which destroyed a vast multitude of the Barbarians, and drove the rest out of the bounds of Britain" (Paul Diac. lib. 4)? and may he not have returned the second time, when once again Valentinian sent them help; that it was not a "spiritual but carnal war" (Bede, i. 17) he came to wage, and that Morgan or Pelagius may be another name for Armoricus? It would be easy, in after-ages, for monkish writers to turn the war into a spiritual war, and the Armorican invasion into an heretical raid, the authors of which were at any rate "conveyed up into the continent that the country might be rid of them" (Bede, i. 21).

Now, in Percy's Merlin (Ed. Furnivall), 832, the same story crops up as regards Merlin's mother. Blasye the Hermit takes great interest in her, when she comes to tell him of her case, promises he will "help her with all his might," fights her battle with "the justice;" she is shut up in a tower until she is confined; the child is, however, let down by a cord, and he takes him home and christens him; and this child "is of God, sende for to helpe Englande" (1084).

Then we draw on to the account of the story of Igerne and Uther,

(see Morte d'Arthur, b. i. ; c. iii. ; c. vi. ; c. xviii. ; c. xix.) as related in all authors (Chroniclis of Scotland, vol. ii. p. 204) :—

> "And of his getting Uther sum men sais
> Be meane of Merling in tha samin dais;
> The quilk Uter transformit mervelus
> Into the figour of this Gothlous
> Syne in his likenes with his wyfe he la.
> Gif this be suith I can nocht to yow sa,
> Becaus sic thing is nocht kyndlie to be,
> Thairfor myself will hald it for ane lie."

Few, I think, will disagree with our Chronicler in his outspoken and emphatic words. Put it into plain English (Layamon, Brut, vol. ii. p. 385) : "Igærne was great with child by Uther king, all through Merlin's craft, before she wedded." Her husband was at the wars ; he never returned, and was killed. Igerne, whilst what we call a "grass widow," was with child (bear in mind the account Gildas gives of the morals of all the royal courts of those days). Merlin and Ulf take a great interest in that child; indeed, Merlin has "*written down the hour and the day when he was begotten*" (Merlin, E. E. Text, p. 77). Merlin says "he shall have the child, and must do something to atone for his share in the sin." Ulf says the queen must be told when he is born to give the child to the first man in the hall; it is so given and brought away, and christened Arthur. The king is dying, "*some say dead,*" when Merlin appears upon the scene, and whispers to the king, "and no one hears his last words but Merlin, but his son Arthur is to be king, and accomplish the round table." "Thus lefte the kynge with-outen heyre" (95). Ban and Bors and the British kings won't take in the story, and require corroborative evidence, when Merlin wants them "to do homage to Arthur," and it is not until Merlin has sworn before the archbishop that Arthur is the son of Uther Pendragon, that they give in. It is ever and alway doubted. Galashyn (p. 177) asks his mother, and she tells him "how it was true that Arthur was begotten of Igerne, and how he was carried away as a child, and

that the barons would not have him to reign over them." Gawaine also questions his mother "if it is true about Arthur being Uter Pendragon's son" (p. 184). Now, if this was brought into court and sifted, what would Lord Penzance say of this story, and the entry in the private diary of the hour and the day when the child *was begotten*? Is not the account of this boy carried off and brought up by Blase, or Ulf, or Merlin, a different version of the same story of Germanus, and the son of the king of Dimetia's daughter? Will it not account for the desire to foist Igerne's child upon Uther, who dies "with-outen heyre," in order that, coming of Uther's race, he may succeed to Uther's sovereignty, and become Pendragon? Weigh the doubtfulness of the whole story, no one knowing anything about it until *after Uther's death*, the suspicious whisperings at the death-bed, after, "as some said the life had left him." Note also (Layamon, p. 385) that "he (Uther) was an old man, and illness came on him; the illness laid him down; sick was Uther Pendragon; so he was here sick seven years." This gay Lothario was paralyzed, and "old," and sick, and yet Arthur was only fifteen years of age when he died! Public opinion was strong upon the subject, and the way in which the barons held back, and the complaints of wrong made by Mordred on behalf of his being "done" out of the kingdom, seem to point to my solution of the story being not far wrong, viz., that Arthur was Merlin's illegitimate son.

Lastly, I make a point which I consider of more consequence than any of the preceding. It is the undesigned coincidences of evidence which ever bring the strongest conviction to our minds. Germanus's friend and intimate and associate is Lupus.[1] Merlin's friend and intimate and associate is either Blase, or else Ulf. Now Bla, or Blaidd, or Blase, is Keltic, and Ulf or Wulf, Norse or Saxon for Wolf = Lupus. The Romans ever translated into Latin,

[1] See Villemarqué's note, p. 147.

as near as may be, the names of the people and the places they came in contact with.

Surely, as we weave these narratives together and spin our yarn, keeping in view one particular thread which seems to guide us through the labyrinth, we arrive at the conclusion that the views now put forward may be, on further research, not found so very far from the truth.

There will yet remain many differences to be reconciled, and many discrepancies of dates and names, of persons and places, to be brought into unison. No one but those who have to do with MSS. can know what liberties transcribers of old oftentimes took with their subject; how in some places they interpolated, and in others altered the text, often meaning well in order to correct what they thought must be error; and again, how a monkish scribe would colour or twist facts to meet his own particular purposes, or hide some scandal to his cloth.

I believe and am sure topography would strengthen my case, but I wish not to overcrowd my narrative, or draw off attention from my main point; suffice it upon this head to say that I agree upon the whole with the theory advanced so ably by Mr. Glennie and Mr. Skene as to the scene of Arthur's exploits being North of the Humber.

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